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## **Tsipras and the rhetorical speech as policy**

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### Abstract English

It is the first time after the restoration of democracy in Greece that such a U-turn has been conducted. The radical, unconventional and extreme rhetoric against harsh austerity was sharply transformed into a tactical retreat in order to supposedly support more effectively the public interest. SYRIZA, a heterogeneous alloy of leftist tendencies, treated the popular anger and resentment towards harsher austerity measures in order to achieve electoral rise. Consequently, it was rapidly transformed from a small – protest – party into a power party. In this instance, it transformed, without moral curb, citizens' despair into an extreme rhetoric which defended their "rights" in order to rise to power. Namely, SYRIZA treated instrumentally the expectations of the desperate as a means to rise to power in order to benefit the party but not for the whole society.

It is the first time after the restoration of democracy in Greece that such a U-turn has been conducted. The radical, unconventional and extreme rhetoric against harsh austerity was sharply transformed into a tactical retreat in order to supposedly support more effectively the public interest. SYRIZA, a heterogeneous alloy of leftist tendencies, treated the popular anger and resentment towards harsher austerity measures in order to achieve electoral rise. Consequently, it was rapidly transformed from a small – protest – party into a power party. In this instance, it transformed, without moral curb, citizens' despair into an extreme rhetoric which defended their "rights" in order to rise to power. Namely, SYRIZA treated instrumentally the expectations of the desperate as a means to rise to power in order to benefit the party but not for the whole society. In a sense, it turns out that this was a peculiar understanding of the Marxist analysis: SYRIZA led to a peculiar reversal of the political concepts of "alienation" and "reification", which were introduced by Marx<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of "reification" in the case of SYRIZA can be explained as the exploitation of political consciousness and confidence of the citizens. Citizens have been reified and instrumentalized through the dispersion of promises, which produced unrealistic hopes. Most people believed the promises but the real expectations were totally refuted. Citizens ended up things, instructed voters. Citizens in this case, invested in the hope which was cultivated by SYRIZA's promises and finally were manipulated into the political process and were used as carriers of political expediencies of a new nomenclature. The intellectuals of SYRIZA have adjusted an ascertainment of Lucacs concerning the degradation of subjective status of the individual within the productive relations of capitalism, a tool of political expediency. In other words, they have sacrificed the human-

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<sup>1</sup> Marx has used the concept of "alienation" as the process of organic relations subversion or reversal and the concept of "reification" as the process in which the human becomes a "thing", an "object", a "fetish", in other words, a tool for a specific purpose. Marx has also connected these concepts with the production process and particularly with the capitalist production process in which the entity is alienated from the worker and it becomes forced, as a means to meet immediate survival needs. Under these conditions, the man feels free only as an animal. As Marx notes "as more wealth is produced by the worker and as the production increases, the worker is becoming poorer. The more goods produced, the commodity becomes cheaper. The devaluation of man grows in direct proportion to the increasing value of things. Work not only produces goods, it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity -with the same ratio that produces goods"(1).

citizen in the name of the electoral power increase of their party, as a procedure of the overall progress of the Left (3). Thus, in the logic of SYRIZA the productive dimension is substituted by a political dimension which concerns the reproduction of power relations, with the electoral domination of the party. In this case, the subject of politics, namely the human being, is sacrificed in the name of party imposition, suggesting both that they perceive politics as the identification of the party to political power rather than political power as a means for social change and the empowerment of human beings from capitalist power structures.

In conclusion, SYRIZA expresses a new political fetishism which utilizes the power as a tool for the reinforcement of itself (fürsich), i.e. an end in itself. Hence, SYRIZA unprecedentedly capitalized politically the difficult situation that Greeks encountered since the onset of the financial crisis. This fact reflects the skewed importance that they attach to citizens, namely as a gregarious crowd seeking for a representative and a helper. This distorted image of the citizen is incorporated with the exaggerated promotion of the belief that Alexis Tsipras and his party had the exclusive privilege to express authentic people, although they only occasionally represent a minority. Indeed, SYRIZA received only 19% of the votes of the total electorate because the 35.5% that gained in the elections, based on a 53.5% turnout rate, is actually equivalent to 19% of total voters. A. Tsipras never misses the opportunity to raise pompously the proximity of his party with the people with rhetorical arias such as “we came to abolish privileges and give the power to where it originates, i.e. to the Greek people” (4). This type of populism is determined by a vague enemy - friend scheme. Both friend and enemy remain rhetorically and rationally indeterminate entities behind vague references to people (friend) and “off-center powers” (enemy). Tsipras frequently displays a picture of conspiracies under which “the governments in this place should be raised and removed by the people, not by the off-center powers”. Interpreting his policy as an expression of the will of the people against some unspecified dark forces, A. Tsipras believes that his government puts an end to that tradition, according to which “once... governments were removed by the palace”, noting pompously that “now our palace is over” and that “we will not only endure but also achieve our goals”. (5) In his anxiety to become the monopolized exponent of the people,

Tsipras seem to be unaware that the political power of the palace in Greece ended in 1974 with the restoration of democracy and is not a recent event.

Obviously, A. Tsipras is guided by a Leninist conception of the people on the basis that “the Left .... throughout history, but mainly in the most critical moments .... was claiming for inspiration, and was claiming for the natural guidance of the people” and “the party, the collective subject or any form of it, played a decisive role in developments, its wishes were always in the disposal of the people and of the country” (6). In other words, the citizen is apprehended as something driven collectively, is defined as “people” and “needs” and becomes a guide for the party in order to proceed safely in the stormy waters of the economic crisis. For this reason, the Prime Minister systematically relies on collectivity, drawing with vivid colors the nonnegotiable part of the history, the pride and people’s dignity as “sacred and non-negotiable values” and SYRIZA as “flesh from the flesh of the people that will serve until the end” (7).

The political fetishism of power which is expressed by SYRIZA, was manifested in all its dimensions after the relinquishment of the “left” government to the creditors’ proposals and the signing of the third memorandum. Swiftly, SYRIZA adopted the austerity direction as if it was an obvious policy, while A. Tsipras, who, as the leader of the main opposition party, expressed the quintessence of left radicalism, was finally transformed into a public supporter of the market economy (8). Most Members of the Parliament (MPs) and ministers of the ruling party were even jubilant after the enactment of the new memorandum that kept their positions in the parliament despite the fact that they publicly manifested their disagreement (9).

In any case, from that point onwards, in the position of the adventurist verbosity and arrogant irredentism of proud self-sacrifice, the Prime Minister’s rhetoric adopted the relativism of peoples’ “pride”, showing awareness that reality usually requires “horizontal measures in order to achieve the sustainability of the system”. Even so, he promised to find “the way to distinguish those who really have crucial needs and those who are able to contribute, because if you do not contribute you will never be able to create a sustainable system” (10). But, who will mainly “lift the weights” in order to secure the socially vulnerable and how?

From the beginning, SYRIZA has selected the field of fiscal policy in order to implement redistribution against the privileged. To this end, Greek citizens have been transformed into a permanent tool and specifically, a tax tool, as long as the governmental project essentially defends austerity, more than any other program that preceded it. Under this governmental policy, Greeks have been perceived more as national taxpayers than as citizens.

For SYRIZA, tax increases, mostly for the middle socio-economic groups, comprise a central policy tool for ensuring budgetary adjustment, as it was agreed in the third memorandum signed by the leftist government. The logic of the “one-dimensional” taxation against the majority is embellished by A. Tsipras with a supposed intention for a top down redistribution. But this intention is manifestly hypocritical once tax increases and wage reductions for the middle socio-economic groups, mainly of the private sector, since the beginning of fiscal adjustment, have been tremendous while public funds wasting for the public sector are only slightly reduced without increase in efficiency. The tax increase persistence of the left government was already reflected by its policy statements, during a period that the new memorandum had not yet been agreed. As noted by A. Tsipras “the really great fight, the really relentless battle that this government is ready to give at any cost, is the battle against extended corruption, against the cliental system, as well as against tax evasion and avoidance that was the real reason that the country reached the brink”.

After winning the elections, A. Tsipras focused his rhetoric on the economic elite and the upper layers of the self-employed to increase state revenues. According to the Prime Minister, “the period of the crisis and the memorandum deepened the taxpaying inequality in an unprecedented way and has exhausted the usual suspects (i.e. socio-economic groups) with the increase both of direct and indirect taxation. Tax justice is an unknown word in Greece and the constitutional requirement for proportional tax burden remains inapplicable ... each citizen and each company will contribute to the common depending on the tax-paying capacity” (11). Hence, the Prime Minister announced changes in taxation, such as the introduction of a flat and progressive tax range, the establishment of tax-free threshold to 12,000 euros and registration of property in Greece

and abroad, in order to reduce tax avoidance (12). After signing the memorandum measures such as the taxation of farmers, the increased taxation of enterprises from 26% to 29%, the increase to 80% of the advanced tax for the first year and 100% for the second year and the increase in VAT to 24%, will dramatically reduce the viability prospects for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (13).

It is significant that according to data from ESEE, 60,000 Greek companies have applied to move to Bulgaria lately, and as stated by the Bulgarian Institute for Market Economy, currently in Bulgaria there are 14,000 Greek companies employing 70,000 people whereas before the crisis the Greek companies were only 1,500 (14). Clearly, progressive taxation can be considered as a proper, modern and fair tax policy tool which contributes to the reduction of inequality and can promote social justice. Progressive taxation as a redistributive tool has been already suggested by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto (1848) (15). For both thinkers, it was the appropriate tool in the first phase of the revolutionary process to enable the proletariat, partly with autocratic interventions in property law, in order to wrest the capital of the detestable bourgeoisie. In combination with the emerging social issue from 1870 onwards, the idea of Marx for the redistribution based on needs but not on performance, has gained political ground. Particularly, the socialists and social democrats gradually adopted progressive taxation as a distributional justice tool (16). However, several issues remained unresolved. Specifically, the main question is whether an aggressive or unbearable taxation violates the rule of law and particularly, the principles of private property, individual freedom, equal treatment and limited state arbitrariness. Furthermore, if the progressive taxation, as in the case of Greece, is not based on accurate tax information and sharp income sources, it can become an unfair form of redistribution. Therefore, the hard progressive taxation is not always a tool for social justice but it may become the opposite, as it is demonstrated by the steep progressive tax range used by the wealthy family of Medici in Florence in order to remain in power (17). In any case, if taxation is not complied with the principles of equal treatment on the basis of factual income criteria, it becomes arbitrary and unfair. It is not a coincidence that Thomas Aquinas called taxation as a legitimate steal, if it is not based on reasonable data, just demands and is not dictated by a just ruler (18).

Obviously, in modern literature there is a strong argument that the principle of progressive taxation is a redistributive tool that can provide basic needs to the state, in terms of financial resources, in order to assist poor and social excluded people and to facilitate the principle of dignity to all people as equal citizens in the society (19-20). However, the amount of income tax and wealth is determined both by the existing state financial needs and by social justice principles that require the protection of the principle of equality. Furthermore, it is crucial that social exclusion and poverty are not able to be resolved, as in the case of SYRIZA, exclusively through the distribution of fiscal resources but dynamically, through the provision of training and skills consolidation, health care and opportunities to increase social mobility, cultural integration, political participation and employment. The reference to the principles of social justice includes the involvement of various forms of social interaction that provide decent living conditions among equal citizens. Even if we accept that the objective of combating poverty is highly important, it does not necessarily justify the arbitrary and ideologically charged taxation of wealth and income in the sense that the principles of social justice stand also for income and wealth (taxable basis).

In this case, it is unacceptable to dramatically increase taxation for income and assets as it will lead to poverty increase. But, this is exactly the problem with the fiscal policy that the “left government” implements in Greece. This policy produces pauperization and new poverty. This taxing logic ignores the real wealth and consequently leads to tax avoidance increase as long as the logic of proportional taxation captures only declared incomes, mainly these of the middle socio-economic groups. Only through the capture of real wealth and the introduction of a large property tax (21) could the government claim that it implements a “left” tax policy.

In Greece, the tax burden of the respective income categories is asymmetrical and uneven. As it is clear from submitted tax returns for 2014, incomes over 50,000 euros were declared only by 49,545 taxpayers, of which 27,710 employees and pensioners, 15,159 self-employers, 4,723 taxpayers with income from property and 1,953 farmers (22). Data show that the fiscal policy implemented by SYRIZA is purely cruel and unjust. Firstly, only 15,159 self-employed professionals and 4,723 rentiers seem to meet the



criteria of redistribution of burdens as it was declared by the Prime Minister. Secondly, 27,710 employees and retirees, who have been already taxed hard, are expected, due to the redistribution of burdens, to suffer more taxes in favor of those who declare less than 8,000 euros who will not be taxed. Thirdly, the greater portion of tax evasion is detected in taxpayers who declare less than 12,000 euro income, namely those designated as socially vulnerable.

Based on the abovementioned, the dominant level of taxation is identified to employees and retirees, as SYRIZA wants them to be charged with additional taxes and social security contribution increases, during the period in which Greece imposes the highest taxes to working families among the OECD countries (Greece 43,4% versus 26.9% of the OECD average) (23). At the same time, Greece, according to a global survey by KPMG International, shows the highest corporate tax rates in Europe, which create several constraints to competitiveness. Moreover, social insurance contribution levels are particularly high while the corporate tax rate increased from 26% to 29% (24).

Besides tax increases, further burdens are expected from the pension reform that SYRIZA recently passed through the parliament. All self-employed-professionals, since the beginning of 2017 will impute 26.95% of their net income in social security contributions, with a maximum annual amount of 18,954 euro. In this amount of money, the following taxes will be added: the income tax from the first euro, 26% and 33%, the 100% advance tax, the solidarity levy from 0.7% to 8% and 650 euros license tax. All these lead to the conclusion that the total average burden on the net income exceeds 70% of the total income, a percentage, which according to the international standards, is incomparably unfair, endangering the income threshold required to meet the basic needs. These measures will affect those who declare income which annually exceeds 18,000 euros and those whose tax revenues will be determined on the objective living expenses. The new social insurance and taxation measures affect mostly the farmers and self-employed doctors, engineers and lawyers, who, in addition to reduced pensions, are required to pay higher social security contributions as they are related to income. This reform leads to large increases in contributions to hundreds of thousands of farmers and self-employed. This policy is a version of unprecedented austerity and has no relation to

policies which aim to foster development. Therefore, many small and medium enterprises have massively moved in the tax favorable neighboring Balkan countries while consequently, unemployment in Greece increases.

Obviously, the tax and social insurance policy of SYRIZA mostly affect employees who manage to have income above 30,000 euros and relieve much of those who evade taxes. The problem with this policy of extended taxes and contributions is that it exceeds the required balance, risking to lead the entire society to massive pauperization while increases the tax and contribution evasion incentives. As it was also highlighted by Keynes, the state has at its disposal a variety of tools to create equilibrium in the economic cycle. Among these there is also the tax policy. Excessive tax increase reduces demand by reducing incomes. The private saving decreases as long as consumption decreases. The decline in household demand eventually leads to a reduction in business investment, with compression effects (crowding out) on the labor market (25).

However, SYRIZA is trying to avoid the above concerns by developing a theory of the victims of the crisis and of the proportional tax contribution option. In this sense, the aggressive progressive taxation is presented as the only fair and ethically justified redistributive method. In essence, however, it is an unprecedented tax coercion which mainly subjugates the middle socio-economic groups by imposing burdens far beyond their capabilities. Implicitly, those citizens who have, even in the midst of crisis, the opportunity to live with an elemental decency, are constantly considered as tax evaders. The basic welfare is largely considered as something unethical. On the other hand, a large and critical mass of vulnerable, poor, disadvantaged, unemployed with lower incomes of 5,000-10,000 euro, is being formed and displayed as a "class" which is represented by SYRIZA. This is the elaborate construction of a critical electoral mass of the ruling party. A mass of impoverished citizens, which intentionally reproduces and expands from the policy pursued by the ruling party. The representation of this critical mass is being promoted personally by the Prime Minister amid verbosity which essentially reified the relationship between the electorate and the political leadership. However, beyond the rhetorical verbosity of "pride", the real benefits to the vulnerable social groups by this government are non-existent or minimal.

On the one hand, the political fetishism of power preservation requires the satisfaction of lenders and therefore, the commitment about the necessary resources in the concept of the agreed fiscal adjustment (tough austerity) and on the other hand, the objective of maintaining a critical electorate, mainly through an uncontrollable verbosity, focusing on the enemy-friend dipole and the artificial unity of the people, through a populist rhetoric for a prosperous future. Therefore, the class message for the vulnerable and the people that A. Tsipras emits is hypocritical. This is clear from the implemented fiscal policy, which does nothing more than to produce social injustice.

The tragedy of SYRIZA is that the struggle for social liberation of the vulnerable is associated with the construction of a supposedly new oligarchy according to the Leninist model, which is essentially connected with power and has extended privileges and incomes. For this purpose, the ruling party is guided by a Leninist conception of addressing the citizen, not as a subject but as a vague collectivity, integrated into the general upper feasibility. It is clear that political fetishism of this type has obvious authoritarian elements against which the “good conscience” requires obedience to a higher feasibility, which is the retention and reproduction of power. Good conscience is converted into a pressure tool of the reproduction of social injustice and the critical detachment in misconduct. This whole process finally leads to the moral and spiritual poverty through the remoteness from reality. The “Left” in Greece seems strange, as long as it imagines the future of the world as the establishment of generalized poverty!

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